

The Narcissist's Addiction to Fame and Celebrity

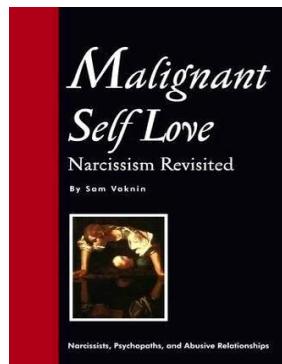
Frequently Asked Questions # 19

Narcissists pursue fame and celebrity relentlessly. They avidly and compulsively garner the reactions to their ubiquity in the media: their narcissistic supply.

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Question:

Are Narcissists addicted to being famous?

Answer:

You bet. This, by far, is their predominant drive. Being famous encompasses a few important functions: it endows the narcissist with power, provides him with a constant Source of Narcissistic Supply (admiration, adoration, approval, awe), and fulfils important Ego functions.

The image that the narcissist projects is hurled back at him, reflected by those exposed to his celebrity or fame. This way he feels alive, his very existence is affirmed and he acquires a sensation of clear boundaries (where the narcissist ends and the world begins).

There is a set of narcissistic behaviours typical to the pursuit of celebrity. There is almost nothing that the narcissist refrains from doing, almost no borders that he hesitates to cross to achieve renown. To him, there is no such thing as "bad publicity" – what matters is to be in the public eye.

Because the narcissist equally enjoys all types of attention and likes as much to be feared as to be loved, for instance – he doesn't mind if what is published about him is wrong ("as long as they spell my name correctly"). The narcissist's only bad emotional stretches are during periods of lack of attention, publicity, or exposure.

The narcissist then feels empty, hollowed out, negligible, humiliated, wrathful, discriminated against, deprived, neglected, treated unjustly and so on. At first, he tries to obtain attention from ever narrowing groups of reference ("supply scale down"). But the feeling that he is compromising gnaws at his anyhow fragile self-esteem.

Sooner or later, the spring bursts. The narcissist plots, contrives, plans, conspires, thinks, analyses, synthesises and does whatever else is necessary to regain the lost exposure in the public eye. The more he fails to secure the attention of the target group (always the largest) – the more daring, eccentric and outlandish he becomes. Firm decision to become known is transformed into resolute action and then to a panicky pattern of attention seeking behaviours.

The narcissist is not really interested in publicity per se. Narcissists are misleading. The narcissist appears to love himself – and, really, he abhors himself. Similarly, he appears to be interested in becoming a celebrity – and, in reality, he is concerned with the **REACTIONS** to his fame: people watch him, notice him, talk about him, debate his actions – therefore he exists.

The narcissist goes around "hunting and collecting" the way the expressions on people's faces change when they notice him. He places himself at the centre of attention, or even as a figure of controversy. He constantly and recurrently pesters

those nearest and dearest to him in a bid to reassure himself that he is not losing his fame, his magic touch, the attention of his social milieu.

Truly, the narcissist is not choosy. If he can become famous as a writer – he writes, if as a businessman – he conducts business. He switches from one field to the other with ease and without remorse because in all of them he is present without conviction, bar the conviction that he must (and deserves to) get famous.

He grades activities, hobbies and people not according to the pleasure that they give him – but according to their utility: can they or can't they make him known and, if so, to what extent. The narcissist is one-track minded (not to say obsessive). His is a world of black (being unknown and deprived of attention) and white (being famous and celebrated).

Mistreating Celebrities - An Interview

Granted to Superinteressante Magazine in Brazil

Q. Fame and TV shows about celebrities usually have a huge audience. This is understandable: people like to see other successful people. But why people like to see celebrities being humiliated?

A. As far as their fans are concerned, celebrities fulfil two emotional functions: they provide a mythical narrative (a story that the fan can follow and identify with) and they function as blank screens onto which the fans project their dreams, hopes, fears, plans, values, and desires (wish fulfilment). The slightest deviation from these prescribed roles provokes enormous rage and makes us want to punish (humiliate) the "deviant" celebrities.

But why?

When the human foibles, vulnerabilities, and frailties of a celebrity are revealed, the fan feels humiliated, "cheated", hopeless, and "empty". To reassert his self-worth, the fan must establish his or her moral superiority over the erring and "sinful" celebrity. The fan must "teach the celebrity a lesson" and show the celebrity "who's boss". It is a primitive defense mechanism - narcissistic grandiosity. It puts the fan on equal footing with the exposed and "naked" celebrity.

Q. This taste for watching a person being humiliated has something to do with the attraction to catastrophes and tragedies?

A. There is always a sadistic pleasure and a morbid fascination in vicarious suffering. Being spared the pains and tribulations others go through makes the observer feel "chosen", secure, and virtuous. The higher celebrities rise, the harder they fall. There is something gratifying in hubris defied and punished.

Q. Do you believe the audience put themselves in the place of the reporter (when he asks something embarrassing to a celebrity) and become in some way revenged?

A. The reporter "represents" the "bloodthirsty" public. Belittling celebrities or watching their comeuppance is the modern equivalent of the gladiator rink. Gossip used to fulfil the same function and now the mass media broadcast live the slaughtering of fallen gods. There is no question of revenge here - just Schadenfreude, the guilty joy of witnessing your superiors penalized and "cut down to size".

(continued below)

This article appears in my book, "Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited"

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Q. In your country, who are the celebrities people love to hate?

A. Israelis like to watch politicians and wealthy businessmen reduced, demeaned, and slighted. In Macedonia, where I live, all famous people, regardless of their vocation, are subject to intense, proactive, and destructive envy. This love-hate relationship with their idols, this ambivalence, is attributed by psychodynamic theories of personal development to the child's emotions towards his parents. Indeed, we transfer and displace many negative emotions we harbor onto celebrities.

Q. I would never dare asking some questions the reporters from Panico ask the celebrities. What are the characteristics of people like these reporters?

A. Sadistic, ambitious, narcissistic, lacking empathy, self-righteous, pathologically and destructively envious, with a fluctuating sense of self-worth (possibly an inferiority complex).

6. Do you believe the actors and reporters want themselves to be as famous as the celebrities they tease? Because I think this is almost happening...

A. The line is very thin. Newsmakers and newsmen and women are celebrities merely because they are public figures and regardless of their true accomplishments. A celebrity is

famous for being famous. Of course, such journalists will likely fall prey to up and coming colleagues in an endless and self-perpetuating food chain...

7. *I think that the fan-celebrity relationship gratifies both sides. What are the advantages the fans get and what are the advantages the celebrities get?*

A. There is an implicit contract between a celebrity and his fans. The celebrity is obliged to "act the part", to fulfil the expectations of his admirers, not to deviate from the roles that they impose and he or she accepts. In return the fans shower the celebrity with adulation. They idolize him or her and make him or her feel omnipotent, immortal, "larger than life", omniscient, superior, and *sui generis* (unique).

What are the fans getting for their trouble?

Above all, the ability to vicariously share the celebrity's fabulous (and, usually, partly confabulated) existence. The celebrity becomes their "representative" in fantasyland, their extension and proxy, the reification and embodiment of their deepest desires and most secret and guilty dreams. Many celebrities are also role models or father/mother figures. Celebrities are proof that there is more to life than drab and routine. That beautiful - nay, perfect - people do exist and that they do lead charmed lives. There's hope yet - this is the celebrity's message to his fans.

The celebrity's inevitable downfall and corruption is the modern-day equivalent of the medieval morality play. This trajectory - from rags to riches and fame and back to rags or worse - proves that order and justice do prevail, that hubris invariably gets punished, and that the celebrity is no better, neither is he superior, to his fans.

8. *Why are celebrities narcissists? How is this disorder born?*

No one knows if pathological narcissism is the outcome of inherited traits, the sad result of abusive and traumatizing upbringing, or the confluence of both. Often, in the same family, with the same set of parents and an identical emotional environment - some siblings grow to be malignant narcissists, while others are perfectly "normal". Surely, this indicates a genetic predisposition of some people to develop narcissism.

It would seem reasonable to assume - though, at this stage, there is not a shred of proof - that the narcissist is born with a propensity to develop narcissistic defenses. These are triggered by abuse or trauma during the formative years in infancy or during early adolescence. By "abuse" I am referring to a spectrum of behaviors which objectify the child and treat it as an extension of the caregiver (parent) or as a mere instrument of gratification. Dotting and smothering are as abusive as beating and starving. And abuse can be dished out by peers as well as by parents, or by adult role models.

Not all celebrities are narcissists. Still, some of them surely are.

We all search for positive cues from people around us. These cues reinforce in us certain behaviour patterns. There is nothing special in the fact that the narcissist-celebrity does the same. However there are two major differences between the narcissistic and the normal personality.

The first is quantitative. The normal person is likely to welcome a moderate amount of attention – verbal and non-verbal – in the form of affirmation, approval, or admiration. Too much attention, though, is perceived as onerous and is avoided. Destructive and negative criticism is avoided altogether.

The narcissist, in contrast, is the mental equivalent of an alcoholic. He is insatiable. He directs his whole behaviour, in fact his life, to obtain these pleasurable titbits of attention. He embeds them in a coherent, completely biased, picture of himself. He uses them to regulates his labile (fluctuating) sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

To elicit constant interest, the narcissist projects on to others a [confabulated](#), fictitious version of himself, known as the [False Self](#). The False Self is everything the narcissist is not: omniscient, omnipotent, charming, intelligent, rich, or well-connected.

The narcissist then proceeds to harvest reactions to this projected image from family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, business partners and from colleagues. If these – the adulation, admiration, attention, fear, respect, applause, affirmation – are not forthcoming, the narcissist demands them, or extorts them. Money, compliments, a favourable critique, an appearance in the media, a sexual conquest are all converted into the same currency in the narcissist's mind, into "narcissistic supply".

So, the narcissist is not really interested in publicity per se or in being famous. Truly he is concerned with the **REACTIONS** to his fame: how people watch him, notice him, talk about him, debate his actions. It "proves" to him that he exists.

The narcissist goes around "hunting and collecting" the way the expressions on people's faces change when they notice him. He places himself at the centre of attention, or even as a figure of controversy. He constantly and recurrently pesters those nearest and dearest to him in a bid to reassure himself that he is not losing his fame, his magic touch, the attention of his social milieu.

Cyber-celebrity vs. “Real” World Fame

I know at least ten people whose personal Websites attract as many unique visitors a year as the number of copies sold of Dan Brown's books. Yet, Dan Brown is a global celebrity and they remain largely anonymous. Why is that? Fame is defined as the number of people who have heard about you. If the same number of people learns of your existence online as has heard of Dan Brown, why is it that he is in all the prime time TV talk shows and you are not? What is the difference between cyber-fame and the “real world” variety? Isn't the Internet an integral part of our reality?

Not really.

Many veteran institutions regard cyberspace as a threat to their continuing prosperity, or even existence. The publishing, music, and film industries; academe; libraries; bookstores; newspapers; and governments are all apprehensive about the Internet's culture of laissez faire, seeming encroachment on their territories, and controlled [anarchy](#). They deliberately (and at their own peril) ignore the main actors there. Thus, while “real-world” experts may have a presence on the Internet (in the form of a blog or a social networking page), specialists whose mainstay is in cyberspace are rarely if ever invited to share their wisdom and

experience with academics and other gatekeepers. They are shunned because they “lack credentials” or because their virtual presence makes them “not serious”. Online fame and celebrity do not spill over into television and magazine fame or academic recognition because television and magazines and universities and publishers of works of reference are being decimated by the Internet and regard it as “the competition”.

The medium itself – the Internet – poses additional obstacles to attaining “real world” fame. Because barriers to entry are low (anyone can and does have a Website), reputation relies solely on word-of-mouth. As opposed to other mechanisms of establishing reputation and credentials (such as peer review or investigative journalism), the word-of-mouth sort is very easy to manipulate and control. The Internet’s is a mob mentality and crowds source its “information”. In other words: to an extreme degree, you can’t trust what you read and see online. Text, images, videos can all be doctored and tampered with. Nothing is authentic and, therefore, nothing is “real”. Rumours, gossip, and disjointed facts pass for “knowledge” or “reporting”. Since the bulk of cyberspace is populated by anonymous users and because identities, personal biographies, credentials, and claims cannot be staked or supported properly, the Internet is a universe of apparitions, ephemeral avatars, and “handles”. These tend to vanish overnight with startling regularity.

The celebrities of the “real world” – from Madonna to Dan Brown – have been with us for many years. Their output has been vetted by peers, editors, publishers, media executives, producers, anchors, eyewitnesses, and flesh-and-blood consumers. We feel a modicum of intimacy with Brad Pitt that we can never develop with, say, Larry Singer (a co-founder of the [Wikipedia](#)). Brad Pitt is three-dimensional: he has a body, a face, a wife, kids, habits we follow, comments he utters, interviews he grants, property he buys and sells, movies he makes, causes he supports. The number of people who use the Wikipedia annually far exceeds the number of people who had watched all of Pitt’s films put together. Yet, few have heard about Sanger. That’s because Sanger is a mere handle: he is two-dimensional, more a representation of a concept than a “person”. We may know he is out there and we may be cognizant of his contributions to the Wikipedia and Citizendium, but that is the extent of it. Jimmy Wales – Wikipedia’s other co-founder and driving force – is as close to a cyber-celebrity as they get, yet even he doesn’t reap an infinitesimal fraction of the coverage that Pitt effortlessly garners.

Until the [Internet is better regulated](#), the way to fame is outside its bounds. Cyberspace is merely another – marginal and auxiliary - marketing and branding venue. No matter how many people have visited your Website as long as they haven’t “met” you through a more reliable venue (newspaper, print book, television, even radio), you are likely to remain anonymous (literally: nameless).

Narcissist of Substance vs. Narcissist of Appearances

Why do some narcissists end up being over-achievers, pillars of the community, and accomplished professionals - while their brethren fade into obscurity, having done little of note with their lives?

There seem to be two types of narcissists: those who derive ample [narcissistic supply](#) from mere appearances and those whose narcissistic supply consists of doing substantial deeds, of acting as change-agents, of making a difference, and of creating and producing things of

value. The former aim for celebrity (defined as "being famous for being famous"), the latter aim for careers in the limelight.

The [celebrity narcissist](#) has a short attention span. He rapidly cycles between the [idealization and devaluation](#) of ideas, ventures, places, and people. This renders him unfit for team work. Though energetic and manic, he is indolent: he prefers the path of least resistance and adheres to shoddy standards of production. His lack of work ethic can partly be attributed to his overpowering sense of entitlement and to his magical thinking, both of which give rise to unrealistic expectations of effortless outcomes.

The [life of the celebrity narcissist is chaotic](#) and characterized by inconsistency and by a dire lack of long-term planning and commitment. He is not really interested in people (except in their roles as instruments of instant gratification and sources of narcissistic supply). His learning and affected erudition are designed solely to impress and are, therefore, shallow and anecdotal. His actions are not geared towards creating works of lasting value, effecting change, or making a difference. All he cares about is attention: provoking and garnering it in copious quantities. The celebrity narcissist is, therefore, not above [confabulating](#), plagiarizing, and otherwise using short-cuts to obtain his fix.

The other strain of narcissist, the [career narcissist](#), is very concerned with leaving his mark and stamp on the world. He feels a calling, often of cosmic significance. He is busy reforming his environment, transforming his milieu, making a difference, and producing and creating an oeuvre of standing value. His is a grandiose idée fixe which he cathectes. To scale these lofty self-imputed peaks and to realize his goals, the career narcissist acts with unswerving passion and commitment. He plans and inexorably and ruthlessly implements his schemes and stratagems, a workaholic in pursuit of glory and fame.

The career narcissist does not recoil from cutting the odd corner, proffering the occasional confabulation, or absconding with the fruits of someone else's labor. But while these amount to the entire arsenal and the exclusive modus operandi of the celebrity narcissist, they are auxiliary as far as the career narcissist is concerned. His main weapon is toil.

The career narcissist is a natural-born [leader](#). When not a [guru at the center of a cult](#), he operates as the first among equals in a team. This is where the differences between the celebrity narcissist and the career narcissist are most pronounced: the relationships maintained by the former are manipulative, exploitative, and ephemeral. The career narcissist, by comparison, is willing and able to negotiate, compromise, give-and-take, motivate others, induce loyalty, forge alliances and coalitions and benefit from these in the long-term. It is this capacity to network that guarantees him a place in the common memory and an abiding reputation among his peers.

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